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## THE DEATH OF AJAX: ON AN ETRUSCAN MIRROR IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS IN BOSTON

BY EDMUND VON MACH

**A**MONG the recent acquisitions of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston there is an Etruscan mirror<sup>1</sup>, the unique design of which makes it of prime importance for the student of literature as well as of mythology.

It shows two figures, and the inscriptions tell us — if we cannot guess it from the figures themselves — that the woman at our left wearing a helmet and leaning on her spear is Athena (MENARFA); the man with the wild and frightened look, kneeling at her feet, sword in hand, is Ajax, the son of Telamon (EIFAS TELMVNVS). Ajax is holding a short sword, not by the hilt, but by the blade. He has turned it against his body, but sharp and pointed though it seems to be, it cannot pierce him, and the more it is pressed against his impregnable skin, the more it bends like a bow. The hero's agony at being frustrated in his attempts seems to be indicated by his fierce looks and his long and disheveled hair. In surprise he turns his head towards Athena, who stands behind him benign, with her right hand outstretched. I think she is exhorting him; she wants to end his agony and is pointing out to him *something*.

It is obvious that the artist has endeavored to represent an incident connected with Ajax's suicide. Do we know this particular incident from literature, and can this representation be duplicated by any other ancient work of art? The representations in art of the death of Ajax are very rare. When Overbeck published his *Gallerie des heroischen Sagenkreises* in 1853, only one picture was known. Since then others have been published<sup>2</sup>, but so far as I know, none of the lists are com-

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<sup>1</sup> *Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Trustees*, p. 48, for the year 1899: Ancient bronzes, No. 37. Diameter, m. o. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Noticeably by Heydemann, *Archaeol. Zeitung*, 1872, p. 60 ff. For more recent lists, cf. Pauly, *Realencyclopaedie*, 2, and Roscher, *Myth. Lexikon*, s. v. *Aias*.



plete. I, therefore, believe it worth while to collect once more all the the illustrations, which are known at the present day.

- A. Red-figured vase, Palermo: publ. Heydemann, *l. c.*, pl. 46, p. 60 ff.
- B. Small red-figured vase from Nola: publ. *Bull. Nap. Arch. N. S.*, I, pl. 10.
- C. Etruscan crater, red-figured, from Vulci, Louvre: publ. *Mon. dell' Inst.*, II, pl. 8 A, and Overbeck, *Sagenkreis*, pl. 24, 2.
- D. Small black-figured oenochœ: publ. Heydemann, *l. c.*, p. 61.
- E. Corinthian amphora: publ. *Mon. dell' Inst.*, VI, pl. 33; Wilisch, *Altkorinthische Thongefässe*, pl. 5, No. 47.
- F. Corinthian vase-fragment, Berlin: publ. *Jahrbuch VI, Arch. Anzeiger*, p. 116.
- G and H. Corinthian vases, Louvre: mentioned Pottier, *Catalogue des vases antiques du Louvre*, II, pp. 444 and 447.
- I. Unpublished aryballus<sup>1</sup>, probably Boeotian imitation of early Corinthian Ware, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ajax, bearded, with his long hair caught up and falling in a mass over his forehead, is lying in an attitude similar to that of D, only nearer to the ground. The sword is fixed in the ground, but by a peculiar use of the incised lines it passes in front of Ajax's body instead of piercing him. No other persons or accessories are represented.
- J. Etruscan mirror, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Published herewith.

It will be seen that the list of five representations given by Heydemann<sup>2</sup> in 1872 has been increased to ten. In five cases (C, D, E, F, I) Ajax's attempt at suicide has been successful, and we have the hero *φασγάνῳ περιπτυχής* (Soph. *Aj.* 899). In two out of these five cases other figures besides Ajax are introduced: Odysseus and Diomedes (E), a woman (Tecmessa?) and a warrior (D), while the dead hero is alone

<sup>1</sup> See *Twenty-fourth Annual Report*, p. 56, vases, No. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Neither of the lists given by O. Rossbach in Pauly, *Realencycl.*, nor by C. Fleischer in Roscher's *Myth. Lexikon*, is complete. In Fleischer's list there are two wrong references due to misprints.

three times (C, F, I). In all three cases the sword is firmly planted in the ground: in E and F it has passed through the middle of the body; in C, and possibly in D and I, the artist has endeavored to show it entering under the armpit.

In A, B, and J, the hero is preparing to die. He is alone in B, and seems to be praying; his arms are outstretched; the sword is already planted in the ground. The same is the case in A, where *Charun*, the Etruscan god of death, is gently coming up behind the hero, who seems to chide and argue with Athena, who on her part, however, appears not to listen to him. She stands, in the corner of the picture, with her left foot on the slaughtered sheep. Here then the artist seems to have compressed into the narrow margin of one picture the hero's insanity and his death which, to a certain extent, was the natural outcome of the former. Heydemann, I believe, is right in referring (*l. c.*) this representation to the myth which was followed by Sophocles, although, of course, in Sophocles Athena is not present in the death scene itself. Haupt<sup>1</sup>, on the contrary, would like to refer not only this picture, but also C, to the version which we know to have been adopted by Aeschylus, and which is given by the scholiast to Soph. *Aj.* v. 833:

παραδεδομένον δὲ κατὰ ἱστορίαν ὅτι κατὰ τὸ ἄλλο σῶμα ἄνθρωπος ἦν ὁ Αἴας, κατὰ δὲ τὴν μασχάλην <μόνην> τρωτὸς . . . φησὶ δὲ περὶ αὐτοῦ Αἰσχύλος ὅτι καὶ τὸ ξίφος ἐκάμπτετο οὐδαμῇ ἐνδιδόντος τοῦ χρωτὸς τῇ σφαγῇ τόξον ὥς τις ἐντείων, πρὶν δὴ τις, φησί, παρούσα δαίμων ἔδειξεν αὐτῷ κατὰ ποῖον μέρος δεῖ χρῆσασθαι τῇ σφαγῇ. ὁ δὲ Σοφοκλῆς ἐριθεῦσαι μὲν τι ὥς πρεσβυτέρῳ μὴ βουλευθεῖς οὐ μὴν παραλιπεῖν αὐτὶς κικιμάζων ψιλῶς φησι

πλευρὰν ἀναρρήξαντα τῷδε φασγάνῳ  
κατὰ τί τὴν πλευρὰν μὴ εἰπών.

I cannot agree with Haupt, but rather side with Mr. John Marshall<sup>2</sup>, who denies the correctness of Haupt's assertion, in the case of C, on the weighty ground that Athena is not present; for among the few

<sup>1</sup> G. Haupt, *Dissertationes Hallenses*, XIII, p. 117 ff.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter which Mr. Edward Robinson has kindly placed at my disposal, and which by several references and suggestions has been of the greatest assistance to me in preparing this article.

things that we know of Aeschylus's version three facts stand out prominently. One of them is the *goddess present* (παρούσα δαίμων), while the next important fact is, I believe, that she enters into the action of the scene: she points out to Ajax his only vulnerable spot. And since in A the goddess is present, to be sure, but inactive and certainly not taking any part in the intended suicide, I believe that also in this case Haupt's attempt to claim the picture as an illustration of Aeschylus's story has been unsuccessful.

Matters are very different on the Etruscan mirror in Boston. Athena is not only present, but she is acting her part: she is pointing out to Ajax something, and we know now that this something is his *μασχάλη*, the only point where he is vulnerable, where the sword can enter the body. And here we come to the third prominent part in the story attributed to Aeschylus: until the goddess *ἔδειξεν αὐτῷ μασχάλην* Ajax's sword *bent like a bow*. We could not wish a better representation of this story than is given on our mirror.

Here then at last we have found a representation in art of the death of Ajax which follows the myth adopted by Aeschylus, while it also enables us to give a name to the anonymous *παρούσα δαίμων* of the scholiast: it is Athena. This discovery necessitates a revision of both Hermann's and Wecklein's attempt to restore from the scholiast's quotation the original verses by Aeschylus. Wecklein reads:

τὸ ξίφος  
ἔκαμπτε, τόξον ὥς τις ἐντείνων <ἀνὴρ>  
τοῦ χρωτὸς ἐνδιδόντος οὐδαμῇ σφαγῇ  
πρὶν δὴ παρών τις δαιμόνων <τὸ καίριον>  
ἔδειξεν αὐτῷ μασχάλης . . .

His change from *παρούσα* to the *masculine* gender *παρών* was risky in itself, and in view of our mirror becomes impossible. It is a female divinity, a specific goddess, Athena. I, therefore, believe that the 'τις' of the scholiast ought to be omitted. The words *παρούσα* and *δαίμων* I believe to be quoted from Aeschylus. But in their connection they did not mean 'some one of the gods', but they meant 'the goddess who was present', and thus very likely referred to Athena, who doubtless had been mentioned before. On these grounds, and a few others, which I shall mention below, I believe that Hermann also is mistaken,

who keeps the indefinite *τις* and omits several words, which, with Wecklein, I believe to have stood in the original text. Hermann reads:

ἐκαμψε, τόξον ὥς τις ἐντρένων ξίφος  
πρὶν δὴ παροῦσα δαιμόνων τις <εὐφρόνως>  
ἔδειξεν αὐτῷ . . .

Is it, however, not remarkable to see how correctly Hermann's sympathetic genius has conceived the spirit of the myth? No word could better describe Athena's gesture on the mirror than Hermann's *εὐφρόνως*. The kind and reconciled goddess by her gesture ends the hero's agonies.

Nevertheless, I believe Hermann's reconstruction to be mistaken. But before I offer the possibility of another, I should like to call attention to a few facts which in this case make it difficult to glean from the scholiast's prose version those words which Aeschylus had used, and to arrange them afterwards in such a fashion as he might have done.

From the fact that the scholiast twice inserts the word *φησί*, it seems that at least some of the words used by him are literally quoted from Aeschylus, while it is just as apparent from the entire passage that the scholiast took equal pains to take the words out of their proper construction and to adopt them to his own sentences. *τόξον ὥς τις ἐντρένων* seem to fit so well into the iambic trimeter, that with Wecklein and Hermann I believe them to be Aeschylus's own words. The laws of the irrational syllables assign to these words one specific place in the verse, i. e. ending with the fifth foot. As they stand in the scholiast they are taken out of any grammatical construction: they lack the verb, which was either carelessly omitted by the scholiast or else must be supplied by the verb of the main sentence. Wecklein and Hermann have preferred the second alternative and have seen this verb in *ἐκάμπτετο*. It necessitated the slight change from the passive to the active, which in Wecklein's version hardly can be called a change, because he has the word *τόξον* following immediately upon the verb, and since *τόξον* begins with the letters *τ ο* nothing is easier of explanation than that the scholiast had mistaken the initial letters of *τόξον* to be the passive ending of the verb. There is, however, one grave objection to this reading, viz. that the iterative imperfect fits the main clause: 'his sword bent as often as he tried it'; but it does not fit the subordin-

ate clause at all, because a man stringing his bow bends it but once. Hermann has seen this objection. He writes the aorist. But neither with him can we agree, because the imperfect in the main clause is so much in place that we dislike to amend it, and because it is rather difficult to explain why the scholiast should have copied the imperfect and at that in the passive, if Aeschylus had written the aorist active. These considerations compel me to accept the other of the two alternatives mentioned above: i. e. to assume that Aeschylus had given the subordinate clause its specific verb. It is natural to believe that, if such a verb was written, it had its place after *ἐντείνων*, i. e. ending the verse as the sixth foot. But why did the scholiast omit this word? To this, I believe, we may offer the very probable answer that this word, being the last one in this verse, may have looked much like the ending of another verse already quoted; and that the scholiast, careless and knowing that he had copied some words out of their proper connection, believed this word to be one of them. Acting upon this presumption I suggest tentatively the word *στρέφη*, which in the manuscript would have looked much like *σφαγῇ*, a word which in the scholiast's order actually holds the place immediately preceding this subordinate clause.

If we accept *στρέφη*, a slight change, yet practically no change, reading *ἂν τείνων* instead of *ἐντείνων*, becomes necessary. But the great advantages in assigning the subordinate clause its special verb are, that we not only avoid the difficulties which confronted Wecklein and Hermann, but that we are enabled to retain *ἐκάμπτετο* in its passive form. It seems much better to have the sword bent, as it were, by *some supernatural force*, than to have the hero represented as doing the bending *himself*. I, therefore, would read:

τόξον ὥς τις ἂν τείνων στρέφη,  
 <τοσόνδε καὶ χαλκοῦν> ἐκάμπτετο ξίφος  
 τοῦ χρωτὸς ἐνδιδόντος οὐδαμῇ σφαγῇ,  
 πρὶν δὴ παρούσα μασχάλην<sup>1</sup> αὐτῷ μόνην  
 εἰδεῖε δαίμων

to be vulnerable, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> The word *μασχάλην* had been mentioned by the scholiast a few lines above and may readily be conceived as a quotation from Aeschylus.



The scholiast's information concerning Aeschylus has been infinitely increased in interest by the discovery of the Boston mirror, which so well illustrates the myth followed by that poet. But the scholiast also tells us something of Sophocles, and I believe this to be the proper place to call attention to a natural inference which we may make from his few remarks. He tells us that Sophocles was well aware of the story that Ajax was invulnerable, but that he seemed to have been disinclined to follow the older poet too closely. Now we know from Sophocles's play, that before committing suicide, Ajax utters a fervent prayer to the gods. He then throws himself upon his sword and dies. Does not this entire passage gain in grandeur and pathos, if we look upon the prayer not as perfunctory, but as the outburst of a soul in agony, in fear lest the blessings of death may be denied it? The hero dies: the sword enters the body at once, and without any prolonged agony Ajax has crossed over to yonder world. Who can fail to see a sign in this of the fact that the gods are reconciled? for the prayer for a speedy death, surely, could not have been answered so readily, if the gods had not pardoned Ajax's haughty words and his overbearing deeds of days gone by.

If we accept this interpretation, it enables us to add one more intensely dramatic touch to the many pointed out by Welcker (*Kleine Schriften*, II, 287 ff.) as constituting the everlasting charm of Sophocles's Ajax. Welcker there says that the chief reason for Ajax's decision to commit suicide was, that he was hated by the gods (Soph. 458). Rashness, however, was the hero's chief characteristic. If he could be guarded only one more day, the seer said, he would be safe. But the hero rushes into death because he cannot live if the gods hate him; consequently he dies, and his very death proves that the hatred of the gods is spent: they have forgiven him, but he in his rashness has not lived to know it. It is no longer, as otherwise it might be, the gods who in unjust wrath have driven a valiant hero to destruction, but it is this hero's own overbearing character. *Alone* he wanted to fight his battles, *alone* he wanted to conquer, *alone* to decide his fate, and, therefore, *alone* he dies at the very moment when the assumed cause of his death, the wrath of the gods, is superseded by their good will, and when he might have lived unhampered and with the blessing of heaven.